

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
By His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
To the Synaxis of Hierarchs of the Throne
(August 29, 2015)

Most Reverend and Right Reverend brothers in Christ,

“Behold, how beautiful it is for brothers to dwell together.” (Psalm 132) This verse from the sacred Psalmist comes to mind as we behold your beloved countenances at our Synaxis since we have the great privilege as well as the supreme and immensely responsible honor to serve this most sacred, historic and martyric Throne as its hierarchs, succeeding as ordained bishops a long line of predecessors, among whom there is an entire multitude of saintly men who established the Church by means of their toil, sweat and sometimes even their blood. May the Lord God grant them rest and eternal life in the communion of His saints.

We offer glory and praise to our God in Trinity for deeming us worthy of this great gift to gather in the same place in the name of the Lord, with Him, according to His own assurance (Matt. 18.20), present among us and with His love binding us together (2 Cor. 5.14), “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4.3), bearing witness and confirming that “we who are many are one body” (1 Cor. 10.17), one Church, “albeit scattered throughout the universe to the ends of the earth.” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies I, x, 1) We wholeheartedly thank each and every one of you for eagerly responding to our invitation and hastening to come here from near and afar as a sign of your love and devotion to the Mother Church and this Throne, whose cross you bear together with its Patriarch like co-Cyrenaeans, each of you from the position where you have been assigned. Filled with joy and delight, we welcome you to the court of the Mother Church and wish you a pleasant and in every way joyful stay in this historic City, the great nurturer of our people and of contemporary civilization.

All of the Hierarchs of the Ecumenical Throne that bear the episcopal office were invited to participate in this Synaxis inasmuch as together they comprise the sacred body of its Hierarchy, irrespective of administrative levels in its canonical structure. As we know, in accordance with Orthodox ecclesiology, all bishops are equal from the perspective of sacramental grace, while their administrative distinction and ranking in no way affects this equality. Inasmuch as the present Synaxis has no administrative character, it constitutes the natural space for all bishops of the Throne, whom we welcome here with immense joy.

Moreover, it is with great joy that we also welcome to this Synaxis our brother Hierarchs, who shepherd the eparchies of the Ecumenical Throne in Greece, and we thank them for their ardent response to our invitation. As is known, through the Patriarchal and Synodal Act of 1928, these Hierarchs refer administratively to the Sacred Synod of our sister church, the most holy Church of Greece, where they comprise equal members, since the eparchies of the so-called “New Lands” that they shepherd are administered through deputation by that Church on the basis of the aforementioned Act. Their participation in this Synaxis in no way conflicts with what is envisaged by this Act,

given that this Synaxis, as already noted, neither has any administrative character nor is called to make decisions of an administrative nature, while these Metropolitans have never ceased to comprise – even in accordance with the official recognition of the most holy Church of Greece – members of the Hierarchy of the Ecumenical Throne inasmuch as they shepherd eparchies of this Throne.

In welcoming these brother Hierarchs with much love and esteem, we would like to use this opportunity to convey through them our wholehearted Patriarchal blessings to the pious and faithful people of their eparchies, thanking them all for their dedication to the Mother Church, which is fervently manifested during our occasional visits there. May the Lord God guide and protect them in all.

Beloved brothers,

Our decision, which was taken by synodal resolution, to invite you to the present Synaxis, was dictated by many mandatory reasons. First and foremost, “since we were bereft of you for a short time, in person but not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face.” (1 Thess. 2.17) In an age when communication among people abounds through the internet and other means of modern technology, face to face communication among people tends to atrophy. Nonetheless, this face to face communication remains what is most precious and sacred at our disposal, created as we are in the image of the Trinitarian God, without which our life becomes hell. In the well known story attributed to Macarius of Egypt, when a skull belonging to a pagan priest was found on the road, the saint was asked what the condition of hell resembled, he replied: “No one there looks at one another face to face; rather, each person’s face is glued to the other person’s back. And they plead us to look even partially at the face of the other.” (Sayings, PG34.257)

Nothing, then, can replace face to face communication: neither correspondence nor telephone calls nor again any other means, and much more the so-called digital communication over the Internet, which today tends to substitute everything, although it only provides a false sense of personal communication while actually increasing in many ways the estrangement and isolation among people. It is neither insignificant nor coincidental that even communion with God is fulfilled only when it becomes personal in the heavenly kingdom: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” (1 Cor. 13.12)

This face to face communion was the first motivation for the present Synaxis. A second and equally important reason for this assembly was the need to inform you of the work being carried out at the Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. There is of course a multitude of information in our time, but sometimes (if not most times) this essentially becomes misinformation, driven by many visible and invisible interests, not infrequently even inimical to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Such misinformation is primarily to be found on the Internet and creates confusion (sometimes even scandal) to its audience both from among your spiritual flock and even among yourselves as responsible pastors. Consequently, the dissemination of responsible information on the part of the Mother Church is rendered obligatory in order for the faithful people of God in turn to be informed by you so that it may look upon its spiritual leaders, who labor

and toil in their tireless effort to guide the ship of the Church often through the adverse weather conditions to the fulfillment of its sacred mission in the contemporary world.

The conditions under which this sacred institution lives and acts are well known to all of you. The dwindling community within the immediate See of the Patriarchate, which is the result of familiar historical circumstances, is naturally of concern to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. However, the large numbers of pilgrims visiting from abroad, bearing witness to the dedication of its children throughout the world to its sacred institution, fills that which is lacking and revives anew its sacred courtyards, which once were filled with people. We take this opportunity to thank and congratulate all of our brother Hierarchs from abroad, who encourage or organize such pilgrimages, frequently even leading them personally and thereby cultivating and demonstrating the innate devotion to the Mother Church in the souls of its faithful.

Another very pleasing and significant opportunity for the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the possibility not only for such visitation but also for the celebration of divine worship, and especially the Holy Eucharist, in places where our predecessors worshipped God such as in Cappadocia, Pontos, Eastern Thrace and Asia Minor, with the permission of the local authorities. We personally and regularly visit and celebrate the Divine Liturgy in these regions; most recently, we had the moving experience of once again celebrating the Divine Liturgy on the occasion of the Dormition of the Theotokos in the martyric place of Trabzon with the participation of many faithful from Greece and beyond, for the apodosis of this feast in the ruins of the historic monastery of Panaghia Faneromeni in the Chersonese of Kyzikos, whose patronal icon has been treasured in the venerable Patriarchal Church since the destruction of that monastery. Other visiting brother Hierarchs of holy Metropolitan sees also do likewise in their respective regions.

However, the mission of the Ecumenical Patriarchate is not exhausted in its obligation to preserve alive what it has received from its forefathers in its sanctifying and pastoral presence within its canonical jurisdiction. Divine providence and history have placed on its shoulders the greater responsibility of maintaining the unity of the entire Orthodox Church in order to transmit its spirit and mind to people of every period. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has always been the bearer and producer of spiritual and cultural values, while its voice continues to be carefully heeded more broadly and outside the narrowly ecclesiastical and religious world.

Faithful to this obligation before all of humankind, the Ecumenical Patriarchate assumed initiatives of greater and wider importance for the contemporary world, such as the protection of the natural environment, which today runs the ultimate risk of survival as a result of irrational and egocentric behavior on the part of human beings. Thus, already in 1989, as the first among all religious institutions worldwide, by means of an encyclical issued by our venerable predecessor Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios, our Patriarchate highlighted the crisis of the ecological challenge and the need for the Church to contribute with its spiritual and theological resources to the formation of a conscience and conduct inspired by respect toward God's creation, which was granted to us with the commandment "to till and preserve" it. (Gen. 2.15) To this end, through a Synodal Encyclical, we established September 1st of each year, being the opening of the indiction and the ecclesiastical calendar, as a day of prayer for the protection of creation.

This initiative of the late Patriarch Dimitrios was continued and further developed by our Modesty with an entire series of activities, including the organization of international scientific symposia with the participation of religious leaders and specialist scholars in order to resolve specific ecological problems, but also with other events, all of which elevated our Patriarchate as a worldwide pioneer in responding to a challenge that is today recognized arguably as the most serious and urgent problem on the planet. This is attested to by the fact that political authorities in every country are today establishing measures to meet this critical challenge; among these, we note the steps taken by the President of France to organize next December an international conference in Paris, in which we have also been personally invited to take part. We should also indicate that the Roman Catholic Church now recognizes the crucial nature of this problem and participates in the effort to address it, most recently with the publication of the special Papal encyclical, where for the first time an Orthodox Hierarchy of the Ecumenical Throne was the only theological commentator invited to speak at its official launch.

Thus, through its humble and limited resources, the Ecumenical Patriarchate once again today proves to be a pioneer in responding to critical human problems, before which the Church cannot remain indifferent. The importance of all this for the credibility and international recognition of our sacred institution can hardly be overemphasized. Glory be to our holy God for this and all things!

Another area where the Ecumenical Patriarchate has developed initiatives and continues to play a leading role is in the reconciliation among Christians and other religions. This area of activities by the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the target of an ongoing diabolical campaign and slander in certain circles, who claim that we supposedly betray the Orthodox faith. Nonetheless, reconciliation among all people and with God constitutes the very purpose of the incarnation of the divine Word and His sacrificial crucifixion (Rom. 5.10, 2 Cor. 5.19); and so our holy Orthodox Church does not cease praying "for the unity of all." The Ecumenical Patriarchate was a pioneer in the creation of the modern Ecumenical Movement through the encyclicals of Joachim III in 1902 and of the Patriarchal Synod in 1920; and we have no reason to regret this. Our participation in the Ecumenical Movement – whether in the form of theological dialogues or through engagement with inter-Christian organizations – in no way conflicts with our conviction that the Orthodox Church is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, which we confess in the Symbol of Faith; moreover, in no way does it indicate or imply any denial or tainting of the doctrines of our faith or again, as some malevolently circulate, any "syncretism" or establishment of a super-church. On the contrary, through our participation in the Ecumenical Movement, and particularly through the theological dialogues, we offer the witness of the Orthodox faith and demonstrate the primacy of Orthodoxy, toward which respect toward our Church has evidently increased in our time throughout the West precisely because of such promotion and participation. "Speaking the truth in love," according to the Apostolic exhortation (Eph. 4.15), we have nothing to lose.

Our reconciliation with other Christians becomes particularly mandatory in the area of the so-called Orthodox Diaspora, where a large portion of our Patriarchate's faithful live. In numerous Metropolitan sees of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Europe and America, our relations with the local Roman Catholics and Protestants is and must

remain friendly, and we should congratulate our brother Hierarchs in these regions for the contribution to the cultivation and promotion of such fraternal relations, from which their spiritual flock benefits greatly. Thanks to such relations, our Orthodox faithful secure the necessary places of worship, while other vital needs are also met for their survival. It would have been a sign of ingratitude on our part not to acknowledge the respect and unfeigned love with which our faithful are embraced by our brother and sisters, members of other Churches and Confessions, or not to return the same sentiments and actions.

We are all obliged to recognize that the age of pure religious communities and nations has now passed and people are called to welcome otherness as a constitutive element of our societies if they do not wish to head in the direction of conflict and turmoil. The coexistence of Orthodox with other Christians today comprises an inevitable reality in the area of the Diaspora and is rapidly spreading even within nations and societies that were previously exclusively Orthodox. This obliges our Church to adapt its entire pastoral life on the principle of *oikonomia*. Therefore, by way of example, the increase in the number of mixed marriages is now a reality that compels the Church to accept common prayer and worship with non-Orthodox, which it already does in all Orthodox Churches. This is in no way a deviation from the fundamental element that continues to divide Orthodox from other Christians, which lies in the communion of the Holy Eucharist and presupposes complete agreement in the faith of the Church. On this latter point, there can be no exercise in *oikonomia*.

In considering all these things, the Ecumenical Patriarchate cultivates favorable relations with other Christians on all levels, from the smallest parish and diocese to the uppermost leadership. Accordingly, we personally welcome with joy, love and esteem all representatives or even leaders of other Christian Churches and Confessions, also courteously returning such visits as appropriate for all civilized and Christian behavior. This most particularly applies in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, which constitutes the largest Christian community and with which our historical bonds of communion in faith and Sacraments for an entire millennium do not cease to serve as our common inheritance, but also on the basis of which we must rediscover and reconstruct the full communion that we have unfortunately lost. To this end, we carry on the official theological dialogue, which was agreed upon at a Pan-Orthodox level, and about whose progress its Orthodox co-chairman will inform this sacred body. Moreover, we exchange visits at the highest level, whereby both sides affirm their desire to advance in love and truth to full communion with one another. Thus, beyond the customary exchange of visits by formal delegations on the occasion of one another's patronal feasts, we personally attended the enthronement of the new Pope Francis in Rome two years ago; we met with him in Jerusalem on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary since the historic encounter there of our venerable predecessor Patriarch Athenagoras with Pope Paul VI; and we received an official visit from the current Pope to our See for the thronal Feast of our Patriarchate last November. These encounters and the Common Statements signed on these occasions received worldwide attention and elevated the presence and significance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate internationally. In this way, rather than being isolated, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church are promoted and distinguished throughout the world for our own and for our people's benefit.

This spirit of reconciliation and contribution to the peaceful coexistence of all people, which emanates from the Gospel and especially characterizes our holy Orthodox Church, led the Ecumenical Patriarchate to expand its effort for dialogue even beyond the Christian world. Consequently, for years now, we conduct Interreligious Dialogue with Christians, Jews and Muslims, through which we pursue not so much an exploration of theological differences, but instead nurture and advance the principle and conviction – which we personally emphasized in the context of an interfaith summit on the Bosphorus – that “war in the name of religion is war against religion.” A mere glance at the situation prevailing in our world is sufficient to persuade us about how true and how timely these words resound. The Ecumenical Patriarchate provides a witness in this domain as well.

As we have already alluded, divine providence placed upon the shoulders of this sacred institution – which by God’s grace all of us serve – yet another heavy responsibility, namely that of protecting the unity of the whole Orthodox Church. The primacy of honor, which the sacred Canons of the holy Ecumenical Councils have recognized for the bishop of Constantinople, obliges the Ecumenical Patriarchate to this day to fulfill this responsibility for the benefit of Orthodoxy in its entirety.

In the context of its responsibility for the canonical order and unity of the entire Orthodox Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate becomes the recipient of appeals to resolve issues that emerge in relations among Orthodox Churches and sometimes even within some Orthodox Churches, which it solves through appropriate actions, as in the past with the Church of Bulgaria, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Church of Cyprus, or recently in the conflict between the Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Romania. Unfortunately and regrettably, such issues never cease to arise, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate through its Synodal Committee for Inter-Orthodox Affairs seeks to discern appropriate solutions. As you will surely have become aware, most recently a serious conflict has transpired between the ancient Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem with regard to the canonical jurisdiction in the emirate of Qatar, which we have labored intensely to resolve but which remains open; finally, there is also the internal matter of the election of the Primate of the Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia, whose canonicity is questioned both within that Church itself as well as by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and many other Orthodox Churches.

For these and other similar matters, such as the prevailing division of the Orthodox flock in Ukraine, our Patriarchate receives appeals and demonstrates concern for their resolution. Parallel to these efforts, we develop initiatives for closer cooperation and the reinforcing of relations among the Orthodox Churches, so that the Orthodox Church may acquire a united voice and in order to cultivate a conscious awareness that, despite its canonical structure as many autocephalous Churches, we do not cease to be one Church that expresses itself “with one mouth and one heart.”

Indeed, already from the first year of our Patriarchal tenure, we proceeded for the first time ever to convene a Synaxis of Primates of the Orthodox Churches in order to exchange opinions on current issues in our world, on which the Orthodox Church is called to articulate a united word. To date, we have realized five such assemblies, all of them here at the sacred Center with the exception of one in Patmos and, on the occasion

of the new millennium in 2000, in Jerusalem. All of these Synaxeis have been held in a very fraternal atmosphere and issued Common Messages with wide dissemination.

At the last such Synaxis of Primates, which was held here in March of last year 2014, a truly historical decision was adopted upon our proposal: namely, to convene here next year 2016 the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. The significance and consequence of such an event can hardly be overemphasized. Already as early as 1923, the Ecumenical Patriarchate had considered convening a Pan-Orthodox Council in 1925, combined with the commemoration of the anniversary of the 1st Ecumenical Council, but this could not materialize due to the familiar historical circumstances. The effort was resumed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1930, when the Pan-Orthodox Preparatory Committee met for this purpose on Mt. Athos, but again its realization proved impossible due to international circumstances. The matter was reopened in the first years of the 1960s, when the convocation of a Holy and Great Council was decided at a Pan-Orthodox level and a preparatory process was set into place. Although preparations commenced immediately, its fulfillment was unacceptably delayed due to various reasons for around five decades as a result of internal Orthodox problems.

His Eminence Metropolitan John of Pergamon, Chairman of the Synodal Committee of Inter-Orthodox Affairs, of the Inter-Orthodox Preparatory Committees and of the Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Conferences, will inform this sacred body about the current state of preparations for the Holy and Great Council.

We should first highlight the importance and necessity of convening the Council immediately. The long delay in realizing this has already seriously exposed the Orthodox Church before the rest of the Christian world and beyond, to the point of literally embarrassing us when we are asked when the announced Council will finally be held. The Orthodox Church stresses and professes the principle of synodality in its ecclesiology, but in practice it does not apply this on an ecumenical level, presenting instead an image of a confederation of Churches instead of that of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Any further delay in convening the Council exposes our Church not only in the eyes of non-Orthodox, but also before our own ecclesiological principles and convictions. To the counterargument of good-will that is heard, that the preparation of the Council should be more complete and contain more pressing and urgent issues on its agenda, the response is that the greater priority is the convening of the Council itself, which would comprise a beginning for other Councils, which in turn would examine more burning and timely issues. The better option is always the enemy of evil, according to the popular saying; and it would be shameful to lose what is needful in our search for perfection.

A second observation on this matter is a clarification on the nature of the Holy and Great Council to convene. In selecting the name of this Council, the 1st Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference deliberately avoided labeling it as an Ecumenical Council precisely because Western Christians are not invited to participate as members, which was always the case in the early Church whenever Ecumenical Councils were held. The authority of this Council therefore only extends within the boundaries of the Orthodox Church, without this meaning that the Council cannot decide on matters concerning Orthodox relations with the rest of the Christian world.

Finally, it would be an omission not to underline to this sacred body the difficulties encountered in the overall enterprise of convening the Holy and Great Council. The most serious of these problems arise from the fact that many of the local Orthodox Churches have regrettably been pervaded by a spirit of nationalism and even, sometimes, by the very heresy condemned as ethnophyletism, which converts the Church into a servant of political ambitions of the state. Thus, some of our sister Orthodox Churches, which maintain intimate connections with the government of their land and enjoy abundant financial support, strive through every means – including the planned Holy and Great Council – to promote interests and strategies of a political nature, thereby creating fractures within Orthodox unity.

Beloved brothers in the Lord,

With the above observations, we wanted you to become aware, albeit briefly, about the work being performed at the sacred Center by way of fulfilling the supreme mission entrusted by divine providence to the First-Throne Church that all of us have the privilege of serving. This diversely responsible and multi-dimensional task is successfully carried out despite the limited means available to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, especially with the diminished human resources following the closure of the Theological School of Halki, but thanks to the diligence and devotion of the administrative and other staff at the Patriarchate, to which we express once again the gratitude of the Mother Church and our own personal thanks.

We particularly wish to mention here the contribution of our holy brothers that always comprise the Holy and Sacred Synod, which together with the Patriarch oversees the entire progress of the Church's work in order to take the necessary and not always easy decisions. We feel a special satisfaction and offer glory to the Lord as the giver of all good things because, during our patriarchal tenure, we have resumed to the practice of the participation by rotation of all active Metropolitans of the Throne in the process of the holy and sacred Synod, which permits them to exercise their right and duty derived from the sacred Canons, while sealing ever more firmly the bonds between the sacred Center and the eparchies of the Throne.

All that has been said and all that has been omitted, in order not to prolong this address any further, bear witness to the fact that God's grace, "which heals what is weak and fills what is lacking," has not ceased to protect and guide this sacred institution in achieving its supreme mission, granting us the sure hope that no adverse power or humanly possible unfavorable projection will be able to interrupt or interfere with the fulfillment of this mission. For the Mother Church, in the words of St. Paul, "knows how to be abased and knows how to abound; in any and all circumstances, it has learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want." (See Phil. 4.12) Moving through the centuries like the Apostle, "in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute" (2 Cor. 6.8), like him it knows that God's strength "is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12.9). The some seventeen centuries of its historic existence testify to and confirm the words of the Psalmist: "With the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can man do to me?" (Ps. 117.6)

Beloved brothers,

The Church is not of this world, but it lives in the world. (See John 17.6) The problems of the modern world are also the problems of the Church because they are the problems of its faithful. You know this very well, especially those of you that serve as pastors in your eparchies. These problems may differ from region to region, but they are ever increasingly becoming more common. Traditional Christian communities are rapidly becoming secularized, which renders necessary the adaptation of the Church to new social conditions without changing the heart of the Gospel and the faith once delivered to the saints. (See Jude 3)

Our holy Orthodox Church is distinguished for its devotion to Tradition. However, over the centuries, by exercising the properly understood principle of oikonomia, it has succeeded in adapting to contemporary circumstances without betraying the heart of the Gospel. Adopting as a guideline the words of our Lord, that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (see Mark 2.27), and applying the golden rule that concludes Canon 102 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council, the Orthodox Church placed the human person – that is to say, the image of God in Trinity – as the supreme criterion in its decisions. This of course presupposes spiritual discernment and is only secured through synodal decisions. This is why the exchange of opinions among the bishops of the Church on such matters is deemed very useful and necessary. This Synaxis aims to provide this possibility as well to all of you.

Finally, we are obliged to point out the fact that, beyond the dangers arising from the secularization of societies, the Church today finds itself confronting broader turmoil, which in some cases threatens its very existence. This is particularly true in regions, where Orthodox Churches have existed for centuries and where our thought and prayer is constantly turned. In the face of such danger, we only have remedy at our disposal: our preaching and effort for peace and reconciliation. Dialogue for reconciliation is not a luxury today; it is a vital necessity first of all for us and also for the Church. This is why the Ecumenical Patriarchate leads every effort for reconciliation with all its available resources. The times are critical; and our responsibility and obligation as the Church of the Lord, who suffered for the world, call us all to fulfill this mission.

These are the thoughts and sentiments that we felt the need to present to you by way of introduction to the deliberations of this Synaxis. In this way, we wanted to make you sharers of the “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope” (1 Thess. 1.3) of the Mother Church, which has entrusted to each one of you the highest honor and responsibility of episcopal ministry. Looking forward with great joy to an exchange with you of concerns and thoughts that are of interest to you in the fulfillment of our responsibility, we declare open the proceedings of this Synaxis and commend it to the breath of the Paraclete.

“Therefore, brethren, rejoice, learn, be comforted, agree with one another, live in peace. And may the God of love and peace be with you.” (2 Cor. 13.11)